



HEMANT BHATNAGAR

S.V. Rama Rao

Lyricism with a Brush

Megha Sandesam
(*Message Through the Clouds*).

S iramdasu Venkata Rama Rao, an Indian American painter from Palos Hills, near Chicago, was struck by the abstract expressionist movement while learning printmaking in London in 1962. The small-town art student from Gudivada in Andhra Pradesh realized his dream to study American abstract art forms, thanks to a fellowship from Tufts University in Boston in 1969.

“I did not want to miss the great cultural flowering of the time in painting happening in America,” says 69-year-old Rao. He was influenced by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg (American), Pablo Picasso and Joan Miro (Spanish), and Georges Braque (French), who swept the art world with their new experiments in pop, cubist and abstract art. “I wanted to become not only a witness to but also a participant in the American art,” reminisces Rao. He said he moved toward abstract art because it provides an opportunity to express, rather than illustrate, a feeling.

The American art scene at the time was churning with change and Rao was well-placed to develop his own style. He combines what he calls “Indian lyricism” and sense of color with western forms. Most of his work has an Indian derivation—depicting the hills, the rivers running between them and the roads in the valleys.

Rao’s work has received acclaim because of his ability to bring into it an oriental touch of poetical expression, a conjunction of color and preferences that are typically Indian. His blending of three oriental traditions—the wash system of China, the Japanese obsession with line and the Indian style of decoration—helped develop his distinct style. Rao’s plan to combine the delicate colors of the East with the shapes and forms of the West enabled him to obtain a color mixture that is clear in its intensity. “I knew that if I make the people believe that I paint in oil, but it is really watercolor, then it is magic,” says Rao.

After leaving Tufts, he was offered a teaching job at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio in 1970, and after a year he became art professor at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green.

Rao’s works have been exhibited at more than 60 galleries in India and abroad, including the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai, the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Second Biennale de Paris International Art Exhibition in Paris and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. His paintings are also displayed in the Fogg Art Museum in Boston and the Asia House Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Awards and recognition for his work have been extensive, but Rao was happy receiving the Padma Shri from President K.R. Narayanan in 2001. After retirement, this full-time, self-employed artist is experimenting with blending his style with realism and abstract expressionism.

—A.V.N.

